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ABSTRACT

The phenomena of declining school enrollments, budget reductions, and subsequent school reorganizations and closings will continue to grow in severity for some time to come. A procedure needs to be developed for evaluating a school district's physical needs based on identified considerations for efficient operation. The development of such an approach could help reduce any effect of influences not directly related to efficiency. A review of the literature does not disclose the existence of such a procedure. A study of 12 school closings in New Jersey was conducted that utilized KEMEC, a weighted grid system, to establish for each district a school closing order based purely on efficiency factors. Nine of the 12 schools closed were found to be those selected by the KEMEC procedure. The three districts whose closings differed from those predicted were investigated further to determine what other considerations impinged on the ultimate decision. (Author/JG)

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BEFORE YOU CLOSE A SCHOOL

ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FACTORS

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RESOURCE GUIDE -- DECLINING ENROLLMENT

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BEFORE YOU CLOSE A SCHOOL

Economic or Political Process?

INTRODUCTION

> *Between the years 1969 and 1982, the public elementary school enrollment K-8 will have declined by more than 4,000,000 students.*[1]

According to the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare estimates, the number of students enrolled in the Nation's public elementary schools by 1985 will be 26.3 million, an additional decline of approximately 12.6% from the 1976 figures.[2]

The immediate implications include: enrollments down slightly, a gradual reduction in class size; "extra" classrooms are converted into special area instructional rooms, e.g., music room, art room, resource room, media center, learning labs, etc.; some educational program expansion (primarily because of space availability); number of positions are at a status quo level; budgetary increases; and school closings.

> *In many districts, taxpayers see the enrollment decline as a guarantee of lower taxes and begin demanding sharp reductions in budgets which are being eaten up by inflation.*[3]

The problems of under-utilized space and budget shortages posed by enrollment decline and reduced State aid are upon us now and for the immediate future. Whether or not the birthrate stabilizes or even increases in the next few years, public school enrollment will not be affected for several years. Births during the last five years have dropped and that can only result in continued sharp declines in the school-age population.

Experiencing the full impact of the drop are communities lying on the perimeters of urban areas that developed rapidly during the post-war years. These districts, called first-ring communities by demographers, are being hardest hit by declining school enrollment.[4] Having matured over the past twenty-five years, the homes in many of these districts have become high priced due to the rapid escalation of land values. This has placed them out of the financial reach of young couples. Additionally, little land has remained available for further development. The uncertain economic conditions of the first half of the decade of the 1970's have served to make relocation impossible for many property owners whose children are no longer living at home. These considerations, in conjunction with the reduced birthrate, have set in motion conditions leading to declining school enrollments and economic crises in first-ring suburban communities throughout the United States.

If school districts are intent upon retaining worthwhile educational programs and providing quality services, they will need to find new means to demonstrate fiscal restraint. Increasing budget constraints, empty classrooms, escalating cost of energy, increasing salaries, duplication of services across the district as enrollment drecreases, will combine to force administrators to explore ways of reducing expenditures. One consideration most frequently explored is the consolidation of school facilities and the closing of schools.

Many school districts throughout the Nation are presently or have recently been involved in the process of considering school facility closure or district consolidation due to enrollment decline and/or economic pressures. In many areas, recommendations regarding plans for closing or redistricting have been made by citizen task forces and/or superintendents or school boards.

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[1]Katherine Eisenberger, "Issues in Enrollment Decline Within New York State." New York, 1975. p.2.

[2]U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Projections of Educational Statistics to 1985-86: 1977 Edition by Martin M. Frankel and Forrest W. Harrison, National Center for Educational Statistics, Office of Education, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977) p. 13.

[3]"Schools Pressured to Cut Back." The Newark, New Jersey Star Ledger, March 11, 1974, p.1.

[4]Katherine Eisenberger, op. cit.

Arrival at rational and logical decisions can be colored by unanticipated influences. A logical choice school may not be the one ultimately closed because of these influences. The consideration of a school closing within a community gives rise to a series of factors that need to be identified and understood. Economic concerns may be more easily anticipated since the efficient conduct of schools is an expressed goal of board members, involved citizenry, and administrators. There exist, however, additional community concerns. These take as their form of expression influence, political in nature, which is exerted on decision-making bodies. Campbell, Cunningham, and McPhee addressed this condition more specifically when they observed that:

> *....decisions that once were rather straightforward administrative decisions are no longer administrative decisions. Because of widespread social, political and economic changes in our society, many decisions are now political and demand resolution at several policy levels.*[5]

Bailey, et. al., ties the meeting of identified educational needs to the political acumen of educators.

> *The future of public education will not be determined by public need alone. It will be determined by those who can translate public need into policy--by schoolmen 'in' politics. Since the quality of our society rests in large measure upon the quality of our public education, a widespread recognition that schoolmen must be not only aware of politics, but influential in politics, may be the key to our survival as a free and civilized Nation.*[6]

Eliot expands on this theme by stating:

> *Because school districts are governmental units and the voters have ultimate responsibility, school board members and school superintendents are engaged in political activity whether they like it or not. The standard professional terminology for this--a semantic triumph--is 'community relations;' a successful superintendent, particularly, must be skilled in community relations. Why not say frankly that he must be a good politician? Surely it is high time to stop being frightened by a word. Politics includes the making of governmental decisions, and the effort or struggle to gain or keep the power to make those decisions.*[7]

Perhaps the most direct connection between school reorganization and its relationship to influence the school is identified by Lutz and Iannaccone when they state that:

> *....one of the most consistent trends in public education, hence, in the politics and power struggles of education is the process of district reorganization, merger, and consolidation.*[8]

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[5]Ronald Campbell, Luvern L. Cunningham, and Roderick F. McPhee. The Organization and Control of American Schools. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1970; p. 153.

[6]Stephen K. Bailey, et. al. Schoolmen and Politics. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1962. p. 108.

[7]Thomas H. Eliot, "Toward an Understanding of Public Politics." The American Political Science Review. V53:4 (December, 1959) p. 1035.

[8]Frank Lutz and Laurence Iannaccone. Understanding Educational Organizations: A Field Study Approach. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969. p. 18.

The phenomena of declining enrollments, budget reductions, and subsequent school reorganizations, will be with us and will continue to grow in severity for some time to come. A method is needed by which districts can more adequately evaluate their physical needs. An overall procedure with component processes needs to be formulated based on a local district's identified considerations for efficient operation. The development of such an approach could help reduce any effect of influences not directly related to efficiency. With the enrollment decline of the 1970's, a unique occurrence in American education, written information regarding school closing, is of recent vintage. Local district policy statements, studies, magazine articles, government documents and organization-sponsored pamphlets present a cross-section of approaches taken in various locations to deal with the phenomena. A review of the literature does not disclose the existence of a procedure by which school closings can be determined by reason of efficiency of operation and beyond the influence of pressuring interests. A study by the author conducted in the State of New Jersey utilized a procedure that appeared to have value for those districts seeking to make decisions regarding school closures based on considerations of efficiency and apart from the effects of external influences.

A CASE EXPERIENCE

New Jersey enrollment statistics are reflective of national trends. The New Jersey K-12 enrollment for October 1971 was 1,454,158.[9] By October, 1976, there were 76,773 fewer students,[10] a 5.3% decrease. The decrease for grades K-6 was more marked. The 796,803 students enrolled in New Jersey public schools at the K-6 level for October, 1971[11] dropped to 690,087 by October, 1976,[12] a 13.4% decline. Projects indicate that K-6 enrollment will decrease from 533,000 by fall of 1986, a dramatic 33.2% drop from the New Jersey K-6 peak figure of 798,633 in the fall of 1969.[13]

One major implication of these figures has been the discontinuance of school facilities throughout the State. The closing of schools in twelve first-ring communities in three populous counties was investigated in New Jersey with the basic assumption that where a school closed within a district differed from the school recommended for closure by a procedure based on efficiency considerations. It might be attributed to a number of factors that gave rise to community activity leading to pressures being exerted on decision-making sources.

Finding no established procedure by which to select a school for discontinuance in the literature, the study utilized a series of processes featuring KEMEC, a color-coded, weighted grid whose operation is based on efficiency factors. (The grid was developed by Dr. Katherine E. Eisenberger, Hunter College, New York, and Mr. William F. Keough, Jr., former Superintendent of Schools, Bedford, Massachusetts.) Rank ordering locally identified factors, assessing district per pupil costs, and evaluating each school in a district against the established criteria items produced a school closing order. The "most appropriate" school for closure headed the list for each community and was compared with the school actually closed in each district. Efficiency factors listed by the districts and their methods of arriving at school closing decisions were also investigated.

Utilizing a case study approach, nine of the twelve schools closed were found to be identical to those facilities identified by the procedure featuring KEMEC with prioritized efficiency factors. The three school districts whose closings differed from those suggested by the efficiency-based procedure were investigated further to determine what other considerations impinged upon the ultimate decision made. In two cases, the study's basic underlying assumption of pressures on decision makers was supported. One district closed its newest school, a 1.1 million dollar seven-year-old facility. Based on the statements of the New Jersey State Education Commissioner in legal hearings, the Board of Education's actions were legal although the wisdom of these decisions is uncertain. During an

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[9] New Jersey State Department of Education, New Jersey Public District and School Codes, 1971-72.

[10] New Jersey State Department of Education, New Jersey Public District and School Codes, 1976-77.

[11] New Jersey State Department of Education, op. cit., 1971-72.

[12] New Jersey State Department of Education, op. cit., 1976-77.

[13] New Jersey State Department of Education, Office of Management Information, Project Enrollments, New Jersey Public School Districts, 1977-78 to 1986-87; July, 1977.

interview, the local newspaper editor and a PTA president attributed the building's closing to "the insufficient political clout of the neighborhood to save its school." A second closing investigated involved a school facility terminated the day before its September semester opening date. Community residents and administrators indicated that the closing of that particular school "created the least disruption in the community. It had a small enrollment and was in the neighborhood with the town's least influential group." Interestingly, both school neighborhoods discussed were inhabited by minority groups within their respective communities. The third school closing investigated in depth disclosed an unusual circumstance. The closed facility was newer than most other town schools but was built as an office building. Occupied during a period of enrollment growth, this building and a former factory converted to school use were vacated when a new building was completed.

Comparison of efficiency factors listed by districts where a school identified as "most appropriate for closure" by a procedure based on efficiency considerations and districts where another school was closed produced virtually identical results. Costs, educational flexibility, facility age and condition and rate of enrollment decline headed the list for both groups.

Means used to arrive at school closing recommendations in districts where schools indicated as "most appropriate for closure" by a procedure based on efficiency considerations were closed were similar. Recommendations and decisions for both groups were made essentially by the superintendent and the Board of Education. Recently the use of a citizen task force has become the accepted process in the selection of a school to close.

According to Sargent:

> *....for most areas, the size of the fall-off decline and coping with shrinkage will be on the agenda for the 1970's just as much as growth and how to accommodate to it was high on the priority list from the 1940's to the mid 1960's.*[14]

There are community groups, however, who continue to advocate retention of the status quo "just in case" sudden changes bring about the need for additional space. Acceptance of this position would endorse under-utilized schools and drastically lower teacher-student ratios, both high uneconomical and inefficient practices. To many people, school closure seems to imply neighborhood decline. Staff reduction and program elimination are looked to for cost-savings rather than the confrontation and pain connected with school discontinuance. Rodekohr stated that:

> *Depending on prevailing attitudes in the community, decline can be regarded either as an opportunity for improvement, at least in some regard, or as an inevitable source of impoverishment in programs and variety.*[15]

Administrators and school boards will need to provide their communities with the information necessary to understand enrollment decline and its implications. Long-term plans consisting of ongoing population projections and facility evaluations will need to be developed. In some districts this can be accomplished with the appointment of a standing citizen committee on school enrollment. Herron and Fascione state that:

> *....we have no alternative but to strengthen our decision-making base and substitute research methodology and management planning for the political processes that have traditionally shaped our educational programming.*[16]

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[14] Cyril Sargent, "Declining Enrollments-the Numbers," NASSP Bulletin (May, 1976) p. 90.

[15] Mark Rodekohr, "Adjustments of Colorado School Districts to Declining Enrollments." 1975. 57p.

[16] Daniel R. Fascione and William P. Herron, "Projecting School Enrollments: A Research or Political Process?" Paper presented at American Education Research Association Annual Meeting, New York: February, 1971; p. 10.

It was precisely this thought that rested at the core of the New Jersey study. Districts need to develop overall procedures for dealing with enrollment decline in as rational and technical a fashion as possible. Accurate data needs to be constantly accumulated; goals established; existing education policies re-defined and new educational policies developed; and, criteria for school closings determined. As more experience is gained in each state, sharing of information among districts will be essential. The efficiency-based procedure discussed in this paper is offered as one possible means by which to broaden a decision-making base.

A practice presently employed to avoid school closures involves reorganizing school grade patterns. For some areas this may be a viable alternative, but for others only a short-term solution. In the past as enrollments grew, one-room school houses advanced to eight-year grade schools later adding four-year high schools. A later development saw the advent of the junior high school and a 6-3-3 grade organizational pattern. The present trend is to patterns featuring the development of a middle school generally housing upper elementary grades. These patterns generally appear as 5-3-4 or 4-4-4. The redistricting of children from larger portions of a community into grade reorganized schools brings about better facility and staff utilization.

The trauma of a school closing is also avoided. Extending this practice over the next decade could see districts gradually return to the 8-4 pattern abandoned due to the rapid growth of student enrollments during the 1950's and 1960's. In areas of constant decline, however, it may be a case of delaying the inevitable.

One additional possibility to consider for the future involves new construction. In selected school districts comprised of aging facilities, putting up a new building to replace one, two or three obsolete, uneconomical ones may be an excellent long-term decision. In order to accomplish this end, however, school leadership will have to involve the community in a realistic understanding of the present and a shared vision of the future.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT[17]

The various elements of communities affected by declining enrollments in elementary and secondary schools (i.e., taxpayers, parents, students and teachers) often react strongly to the resultant cutbacks in personnel and curriculum, and to school closings. Though there is considerable range in the temper and demonstration of these reactions, communities generally tend to respond more hostilely to cutbacks and school closings under certain circumstances: 1) when they have not been informed of the possibility prior to the board's decision; or 2) when they have not been involved by the board in reaching a decision.

Community response to cutbacks and closings has included petitions, class boycotts, picketing, poll-taking, requests for referendums, lawsuits resulting in injunctions, and formation of committees to issue independent reports. Among less orthodox methods have been an open house portraying "school in action" to rally community support, and a take-over of the superintendent's offices until the administration promised further discussion.

Reactions such as these can be somewhat mollified when the community has a sense of involvement in the decision-making process. Members of a community understandably feel they should have a voice in matters which affect the life of their community so profoundly. They want to be informed of the decision-making process and given adequate time to provide knowledgeable input.

Hence, the attitude of school boards and administrators plays a key role in determining community support for actions taken due to declining enrollments. Community involvement may be encouraged on several levels. The school board may inform the community of its findings and decisions at public meetings. This allows for citizen input at an informal level, and ensures that concerned citizens are made aware of the issues, options, and ramifications.

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[17]William Keough, "Enrollment Decline Information Service: The Implication of Enrollment Decline for Community Involvement." This report, School Closings and Alternate Facility Usage, is a compilation of news clippings that suggest some alternatives. Available from Merrimack Education Center, Chelmsford, Ma.

DECLINING enrollment

ABSTRACTS

THE PRINCIPAL AND THE LAW: SUSPENSIONS AND REDUCTIONS IN STAFF
BY Helen Ditzhazy
ERIC ED 137 987

The first part of this paper deals with teacher suspension and dismissal; Part two of this paper examines the need to reduce staff when districts face declining enrollment, as well as disposition of school buildings and school closing. Failure to recognize the problems associated with declining enrollment could lead to the demise of the public schools as an institution. Some methods for coping with enrollment decline are presented.

DECLINING ENROLLMENTS
Oregon University, Eugene Oregon: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management
ERIC ED 136 349

This chapter of the BEST OF THE BEST OF ERIC contains 16 annotations of documents and journal articles on declining enrollment, all of which are indexed in the ERIC system. Materials on reduction in force, school closing enrollment forecasting, planning for enrollment decline and other topics are annotated.

TO RECREATE A SCHOOL BUILDING: SURPLUS SPACE, ENERGY AND OTHER CHALLENGES
American Association of School Administrators, Washington, D.C.
ERIC ED 125 076

School administrators confronted with the possibility of having to close a school need to inform the public, assess community attitudes and needs, and identify the best possible use of the buildings. Existing schools must be re-examined in light of the new need to conserve energy and reduce operating costs. Measures that reduce energy consumption can be taken and, if necessary, schools can be remodeled. The motivation for modernization is now upgrading the environment and remodeling space for change in the educational program, plus phasing out buildings that have outlasted their usefulness. For schools over 100 years old, historic preservation can often restore and adapt them to new needs. Thirty-five successful examples of upgrading existing facilities, and in some cases, changing their function are documented in photographs and floor plans.

TECHNIQUES FOR CLOSING SCHOOLS. EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES Digest 8.
Council of Educational Facility Planners, Columbus, Ohio.
ERIC ED 126 551

The documents and articles annotated here offer many suggestions for developing closure criteria, planning, maintaining public staff goodwill, and finding ways to use or dispose of school facilities. Examination of this material shows that techniques for school closure are not subject to great debate, but that failure to recognize and use them at the proper time can cause greater furor than even the wildest arguments over theory.

FACILITIES UTILIZATION AND PLANNING
Atlanta Public Schools, Georgia
ERIC ED 135 112

A decline in enrollment accompanied by population shifts, change in social composition of enrollment, central city decline, and urban renewal have combined to have significant effect on Atlanta schools. This study was designed to gather community input, analyze population trends, examine school plants, examine educational needs, and reach conclusions with respect to the use of school facilities. Particular, but not exclusive, attention was paid to school cited for closure. Chapters discuss the problems, issues, and concerns revolving around seven major areas: (1) transportation and safe access to schools; (2) the school as a center of community activity; (3) community development programs, (4) special programs at specific school sites; (5) size and space considerations, (6) level of integration, and (7) community cohesiveness. Recommendations are made for phasing out or conversion of the schools. Minority report summaries that oppose the report recommendation are presented.

ALTERNATIVE USES OF SCHOOL BUILDINGS

One effect of enrollment decline is the consolidation of school facilities within a district. As schools are closed for regular educational use, a variety of options for alternative use becomes available.

In some communities, the vacated building is boarded-up or "moth-balled", while in others it may have been recycled as a material center or a senior citizen centers. In still other areas, schools have been purchased by private business groups or even by local citizens planning a recycled home.

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In 1976, the Enrollment Decline Information Service was developed to gather and disseminate information relating to the practical problems of dwindling public school enrollments. Since that time, this service has been continued with local funding. Several booklets, of current awareness news items, have been compiled and are available to educational practitioners:

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These booklets are available at a cost of $1.00 each title. This cost represents replacement, mailing and handling charges only.

In 1977, several topic information packages have been prepared. These resource packages contain a bibliography, abstracts of specific journal articles, microfiche documents, and where appropriate, complete articles or excerpts from articles. There are two publications available in this series with others planned for 1978.

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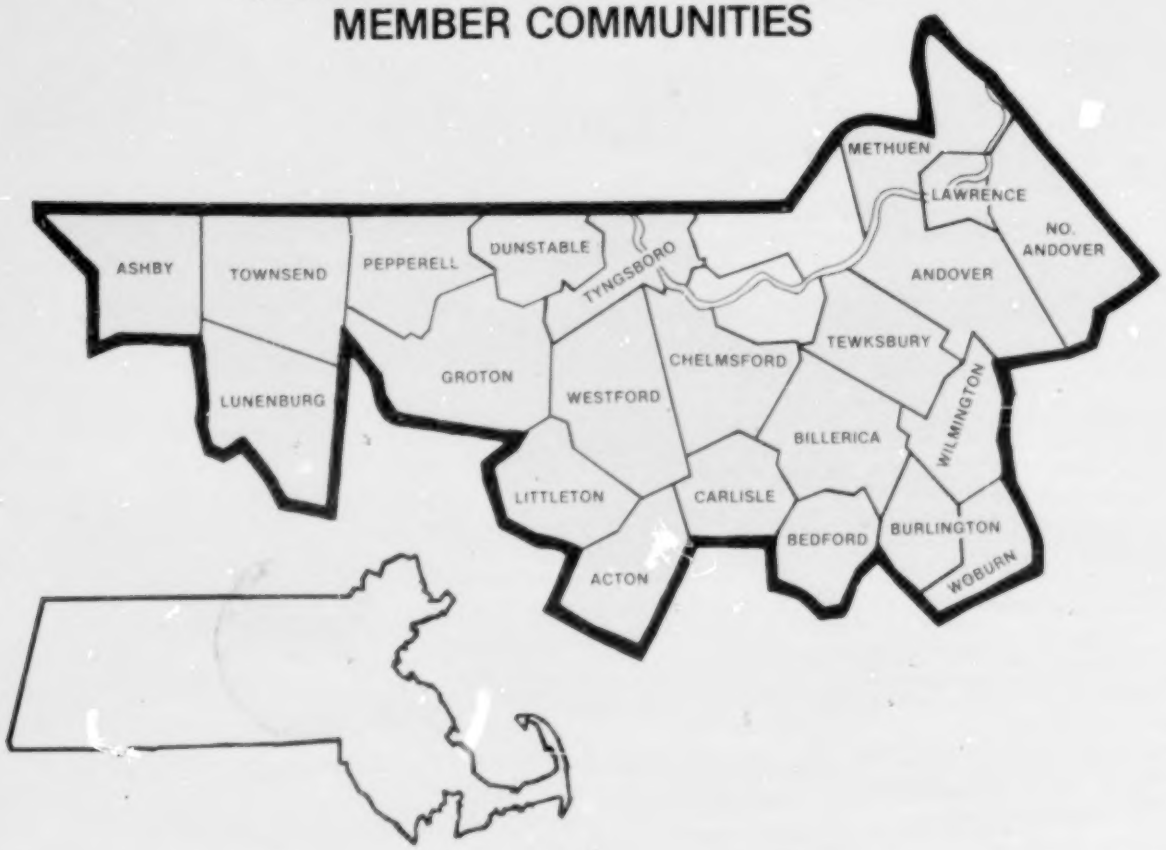

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